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Daughter, Wife, Mother: Women as Emblems of Indian Authenticity Throughout the Diaspora

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DAUGHTER, WIFE, MOTHER:
WOMEN AS EMBLEMS OF INDIAN AUTHENTICITY THROUGHOUT THE DIASPORA

by

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"We are born of woman, we are conceived in the womb of women, we are engaged and married to woman. We make friendship with woman and the lineage continued because of woman. When one woman dies, we take another one, we are bound with the world through woman. The woman is born from woman; there is none without her. (Guru Nanak, Var Asa, pg. 473)

It has been over a century since the maternal side of my family has resided in the natal land of our cultural heritage and religious proclivities – Punjab, India, where Sikhism was established. As an American I continue this extension of our roots from their source. Through the process of shifting location, cultural confluence, and passing time the experiences of the women in each successive generation of my family have altered significantly. No longer are arranged marriages protocol, and no longer is Punjabi the main language spoken in the home, peppered with phrases of English. It is vice versa instead; I only understand a select few words in my mother tongue. The temple, or *Gurudwara,* is visited only on special occasions, rather than being a site of gathering and gossip as it was for my grandmother. Women not only work, but can be the breadwinners of the family, my mother serving as an example. Much has changed and the position of women has evolved with our diasporic existence. However, as I have grown older I have noticed how, even in the aftermath of colonization and immigration, the enduring responsibility of women is reliant upon their relation to family.

This ideology is imbued through the words of the Sikh holy text, the *Guru Granth Sahib,* as well as broader Indian cultural norms regarding gender roles. According to Guru Nanak's scripture, women carry on family lineage. Implicit in this religious tradition of locating family in female members lies the practice of making women emblematic of cultural survival. Thus, within their role of sustaining physical life women also sustain culture. This becomes increasingly important when culture is extracted from its source. Despite dispersion across the

world, the women in my family have continued to fulfill the responsibility of the safekeeping of culture and traditions.

My series of three portraits, *Daughter, Wife, Mother*, illustrates the primary familial ties that determine an Indian woman's identity throughout her life- daughter, wife, mother- and evokes the duty of cultural preservation that is associated with each of them. These oil paintings are based off of photos of me, my mother, and my grandmother from our family archive. They therefore hold a personally distinct and deep significance to me as the artist. However, for the viewer who is unaware of this, these paintings display a narrative of women, or perhaps one woman, occupying the different roles of womanhood within the private space of the home. *Daughter, Wife, Mother* lacks any indications of time period or specific location, thus asserting that this gendered life journey has persisted throughout my family's diaspora.

The Indian woman's identity has never been conceived on individualistic terms (Dasgupta, 178). Among the earliest written Indian documents codifying gender roles was Manusmriti or Manava Dharmasastra, one of several Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism. Manusmriti dates back to second century BCE, and was used as a legal text in early Indian civilization then adapted by British colonial government for lawmaking purposes (Wikipedia). Manusmriti outlines the stages of a woman's life as being shaped by patriarchal societal structure. According to Manusmriti, as a child, a woman lives under her father's protection and learns household chores as well as prayer ceremonies. Next, she marries and moves to live with her husband's family under the rules of her mother-in-law. When her husband dies she lives by the rules set by her sons (Buhler, 330).

Sikhism offered the emancipation of the Indian woman as defined by Hindu as well as Islamic law when it was introduced by the North Indian spiritual scholar known as Guru Nanak

in approximately 1500 A.D. (Sikhnet). In several of its passages the Sikh holy book challenges the biases and abuses against women that were convention during its conception including *sati* (the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyre), child marriage, female infanticide, and polygamy. In such a climate Nanak's preaching that women were 'equal' to men were revolutionary. Ultimately, however, Sikhism was interpreted within the culture in which it was produced. Sikhism adapted the Hindu ideology of family and married life called 'Girhastha', asserting its centrality to spiritual life (Sikhnet). Guru Nanak preached that God is discovered from bettering the well-being of one's fellow members of the family and community. This religious emphasis on the connection between a worthy existence and family life has been conflated with womanhood in Punjabi culture, and such ideology generally applies to Indian culture.

The assignment of the well-being of the household to women has carried on outside of the boundaries of India where the family's well-being came to include cultural well-being, thus posing unique challenges for Indian women as they have adapted and continue to adapt to their new countries of residence (Bhatia, 100). Several scholars studying issues relating to diasporic identity have found that South Asian women are often the victims of the community's attempt to present itself as a spiritual, traditional, and homogenous group with ancient cultural roots. According to sociologist, scholar, and activist, Shamita Das Dasgupta, "The main casualties of our communities' efforts to reformulate homogenous 'authenticity' are women…South Asian women in America are given the task of perpetuating anachronistic customs and traditions." (Dasgupta, 5). Thus, Indian women of the diaspora are simultaneously expected to balance assimilation with maintenance of Indian authenticity not only in themselves, but also their family. As a result, often women who deviate in thought, action, or behavior are marked as

'Westernized' by their Indian relatives and peers. Mothers who do not teach their daughters language and cultural values, daughters whose behavior seems autonomous, and wives who do not prioritize the household can be viewed as not Indian enough, betraying their 'true' culture, or 'white-washed' (Dasgupta, 12).

Indian art, specifically painting, has echoed the societal status of women. Considering the aforementioned designated role of women as maintainers of Indian authenticity (that has been strong enough to persist in Indian communities and families established outside of India) it is not surprising that in British colonial India women were used to signify an Indian national ethos (Uberoi). Thus the essence of Indian culture and society was located in the past and present of Indian women. The present being what scholar Patricia Uberoi states is a "rescripting of the past through the self-conscious promotion of feminine ideal types" these types being fundamentally based upon "…the ideal Hindu woman, and her characteristics derived from a hierarchy of textual authorities" (Uberoi). The Bengal School of Art, spearheaded by Abanindranath Tagore, in its mission to develop an anti-colonial, 'pan-Asian' style of narrative painting, initiated this practice of coopting the feminine form for the sake of nationalist identity and *swadeshi*, nationalistic, values (Chaudhuri). In doing so, the school began an artistic tradition of depicting the idealized and romanticized image of the primitive 'village woman' and her body[1] that continued into the realm of Indian Modernism in the 1920's, and beyond. Modernism in India, while a turning point from the Bengal School of Art, built upon the construction of the 'village woman', using this image of womanhood to symbolize the innocence, rural simplicity, vitality, and pureness that was lost in colonial domination. Indian modernists such as Jamini Roy[2] and B.

[1] See Image 1
[2] See Image 2

Prabha[3] viewed this echoing of the primitivist tendencies of European modernists as an effective weapon against urban colonial culture, and as a method for invoking the true spirit of India.

Just as was the case during the height of European modernism, the female form served as the medium through which socio-political circumstances were explored. The image of the 'primitive' Indian woman hosted disputes over a 'national' style and the negotiations between Western influence and Indian tradition. This art history undoubtedly points to the cultural implications of such representation and signification of women that have continued outside India's boundaries. This phenomenon is articulated by Shamita Das Dasgupta:

> "This discourse of West vs. East, modern vs. tradition is part of a long complex history. Questions of modernity have since the 19th century been debated on the literal and figurative bodies of women, thus it comes as no surprise that the burden of negotiating the new world[s] is born and disproportionately by women, whose behaviors and desire whether real or imagined become the litmus test for the Indian community's anxieties and sense of well-being" (Dasgupta, 6).

In all, it seems that the modern period of art hegemonized and homogenized womanhood as the national culture sought to stake its identity within it.

A key figure in breaking the traditional stereotype of women in art, as well leader in directing Indian painting towards realism was Amrita Sher-Gil[4]. Perhaps the most acclaimed and extensively discussed female Indian painter so far, Sher-Gil's position as an upper class, bourgeousie woman as well as her hybrid allure as the daughter of a Punjabi, Sikh aristocrat and Hungarian-Jewish opera singer elevated her opportunities as a woman artist at the time

[3] See Image 3 and 4
[4] See Image 5

(Chaudhuri, 945). She has often been compared to the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in regards to both the intertwined nature of her life and work. Sher-Gil studied in Paris where she was especially influenced by the style of Paul Gaugin. Later, she returned to India to pursue a professional career in art where she utilized her imported style as a vehicle for the depiction of rural Indian women. In doing so, she rejected the romantic image of Indian women as well as the traditionalism of the contemporary Bengal School of Art as she did not include classical Indian art styles in her work (Kapur, 302). While many of her oil paintings convey qualities of traditional life and contain elements of the primitivism, her studies of human figures are realistic and disenchanted such as in *Bride's Toilet* (1937)[5] and *Three Women* (1935)[6]. Her use of color and line are evocative while remaining representational.

Today, many female Indian artists continue this focus on a realistic portrayal of the situation of women, or on the unique personas of women rather than assigning women meaning. As art historian, Griselda Pollock, asserts, a feminist framing of both the production of artwork and its history must emphasize women's heterogeneity while also recognizing that women share "the historically variable social systems which produce sexual differentiation" (Pollock, 55). With this theoretical outlook, I created *Daughter, Wife, Mother*. Through the motion of my brush, I speak truth to the experience of the women in my family as we are matrilineally passed the task of cultural preservation as displaced Punjabis and Sikhs.

Conceptually, my work was inspired by the contemporary Indian women painter Nilima Sheikh. The artist's series, *When Champa Grew Up* (1984)[7], piqued my interest to create a series of separate but cohesive works that weave together a narrative. This series of twelve paintings

[5] See Image 6
[6] See Image 7
[7] See Image 8, 9, 10

also explores how Indian women's identity is inexorably tied to the family. However, Sheikh expresses how this can result in unrecognized oppression and violence. *When Champa Grew Up* illustrates the distressingly but common story of a young bride killed by her in-laws, a tragedy that unfolded in the artist's own neighborhood in New Delhi (Artsy).

In terms of technique and style *Daughter, Wife, Mother,* is by all means the opposite of Nilima Sheikh and many other honored contemporary Indian artists, specifically female artists, who draw from Mughal and Rajput miniaturist painting and/or Indian folk art iconography such as Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani and Lalita Lajmi (Dalmia). My training is in the classically Western style of oil painting, placing my work in an aesthetic category that is much more similar, and influenced by that of Amrita Sher-Gil. It was by producing copies of portraits by 'Old Master' painters such as Johannes Vermeer and Diego Velásquez of the Baroque era that I developed my method of pushing and pulling paint to bring my artistic vision to life. This pedagogy of painting is clearly visible in *Daughter, Wife, Mother*.

The artist whose oeuvre most impacted my stylistic choices is American Renaissance artist, John Singer Sargent. Although technically American, Sargent trained, worked, and lived in Europe for the majority of his life. His paintings, particularly his grand scale portraits were exhibited in the prestigious *Paris Salon* beginning in 1877, as well as the *Royal Academy of Art* in London (Wikipedia). His technique provided variety from his impressionistic counterparts of the period. Sargent's frequent portrayal of the women of Edwardian-age high society within their luxurious homes clearly parallels my depictions of the women in my family's occupation of the upper-middle class home (Britannica).

As my series emphasizes a myriad of textures, I looked to Sargent's distinct, technical execution of flesh and fabrics that characterizes his portraits. His portrait *Lady Agnew of*

Lochnaw (1892)[8], especially the smooth, seemingly simple but inherently detailed rendering of the subject's sheer blouse, guided my painting of the veil that covers the figure's head in *Daughter*. I also borrowed from his 1911 work, *Nonchaloir (Repose)*[9], compositionally and stylistically when creating my piece, *Wife*. I owe the formulation of my technique in rendering the backgrounds of *Daughter, Wife, Mother*, to Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882)[10], which has often been compared to Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) [11]. The artist's expressionistic manner of depicting furniture and the domestic space without distracting from the figure(s) intrigued me. His abstraction of objects to give a sense of perspective to the viewer as well as his blurring together of shadows influenced each piece in my series.

In creating my own visual idiom I additionally looked to American portrait artists of the past and present including Alice Neel, Malcolm Liepke, Jeremy Lipking, and more. I believe *Daughter, Wife, Mother* falls under the context of contemporary American painting exploring diasporic existence. My Western influence does not invalidate my Indian heritage, nor does my depiction of Indian culture and people deny my Americanness. There is often a dichotomous method of thinking about artists who explore their personal cultural history in their work. Acclaimed artist, Shanzia Sikander, gives insight into this concept; she states,

> "You're either [an] Arab contemporary artist or you're [a] Pakistani contemporary artist. Well, many artists want to be identified first and foremost as artists. ... Their work is not limited to or restricted to their heritage" (Qureshi).

[8] See Image 11
[9] See Image 12
[10] See Image 13
[11] See Image 14

Daughter, Wife, Mother evades categorization and in this way mirrors my own converging cultural identity.

Imperative to my series, *Daughter, Wife, Mother*, was making each piece thematically cohesive in terms of all artistic elements: composition, subject matter, setting, style, and color. After searching through my family's archive of photographs ranging from when my mother was a child to my own childhood, I selected three photos that separately featured me, my mother, and my grandmother, to interpret so as to represent the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. In my initial phase of drawing, I carefully rendered each figure so that its relationship to the background in terms of scale matched its counterparts in the series. As the setting of the paintings is crucial to its ascribed meaning, the figures only account for a small portion of the composition.

I chose to create a series of portraits in order to invoke the collective nature of the singular identities of the women in my family. It is through the direction of the gaze of each figure along with the gesture of their hands that the dependency of the daughter, wife, and mother's selfhood is indicated. None of the figures' faces are in full sight to the viewer. Rather, they are oriented towards or at their hands, also signaling each one's unique duty as bearers and transmitters of culture. The first piece of the series, *Daughter,* depicts my four-year-old self with my gaze averted and hands clasped in prayer. In Sikhism, God is characterized as the absolute mother and father of all people. Likely my first time actively and cognizantly engaging in Sikh prayer, I am fulfilling my duty as a daughter of God and my Sikh parents through my participation in this cultural and religious exercise. *Wife,* has religious connotations as well, although less explicit. This painting is based upon a photo of my mother on her wedding day being adorned with jewelry by her sister-in-laws. My representation depicts her alone in her traditional wedding

gown looking at her flexed hand in suggestion that she is peering at her wedding ring, or her *mendhi*, wedding paint put on women's hands, in contemplation of her future. Sikhism stresses the sanctity of faithfulness in marriage. By having a Punjabi, Sikh wedding, and (as the viewer can assume) marrying a Punjabi, Sikh man, my mother preserves culture. Finally, *Mother*, depicts my maternal grandmother turned towards what the viewer can assume is another person so as to feed him/her a traditional Punjabi dessert, *ladu.* In the original photo the recipient of this pastry was her youngest son. This intimate act of a mother feeding sweets to her children, grandchildren, or simply the younger generations directly from hand to mouth occurs on auspicious cultural holidays and occasions. As a matriarch she is literally and figuratively lovingly sharing tradition with her family. The clothing of the daughter, wife, and mother figures is also crucial to denoting their generational stances. Clothing is the most outwardly obvious aspect of culture. The figure in *Daughter* is draped in her first veil, a *chunni*, but remains in her frock and sweater as she has yet to come of age so as to wear full traditional attire. *Wife* shows the figure in a full wedding gown or *lengha. Mother* depicts the figure in a *sari*, typically worn by women after they are married. All of the represented figures' articles of clothing are related by their deep pink coloring, a conscious choice I made as an artist.

The figures in *Daughter, Wife, Mother* each occupy a domestic setting. In reality, the photos used as references were all taken in the home my mother grew up in in Nairobi, Kenya. As the backgrounds of each piece are linked by their period furniture, their orange, gray, and brown base hues, as well their abstract rendering, the viewer can posit that each figure is occupying different areas of one household. This cohesion is also what may lead viewers to understand the figures in each painting as being the same person, represented in the different stages of her womanhood. The depiction of all the figures in my series within the domestic

space, sheds light on the hegemonic overlapping of gender difference and the separation of the public and the private spheres (Pollock, 69). As art historian Griselda Pollock asserts, "women tend, cross-culturally, to be associated with a domestic or 'private' domain, while men are associated with a more prestigious 'public' domain" (Pollock, 71). For Indian women of the diaspora, including my family, domestic space continues to be encoded and regulated as the site of femininity, and thus where cultural preservation occurs. In contrast, the public sphere is the location of assimilation for Indian women (and men albeit in historically different ways).

My paintings do what photographs cannot; they evoke a tactility that makes the viewer's "eyes function like organs of touch" to use the words of film theorist Laura Marks (Marks,162). By blending oily pigments I emulate and evoke the feel of chiffon, wool, silk, and velvet in my work. Juxtaposing an abstracted, hazy, tone in the backgrounds with a polished quality in my figures, I bring the characters of the series into focus. This project exudes and calls upon memory, transcending geographical boundaries and lacking temporality. It immortalizes the women depicted and portrays an ongoing, cyclical experience of womanhood.

I recognize that while Indian women's connection to family can be a source of strength, it is also one of intense vulnerability as their existence can be reliant upon familial ties. Family is thus often a toxic source of oppression the Indian woman, as her life is embedded in it. There is a frequent denial and disallowance of Indian women's struggle in order to perpetuate the fabricated, idealized image of womanhood (Bhatia, 71). This can be marked as a consequence of citing Indian women as the preservers, signifiers, and perpetuators of culture. I do not ignore the danger and double standard in the practice of making Indian women emblematic of cultural survival, and while I believe in the need to analyze and deconstruct this entrenched notion of

women's roles, *Daughter, Wife, Mother,* does not do so. Rather it simply elucidates these roles so that they can be examined.

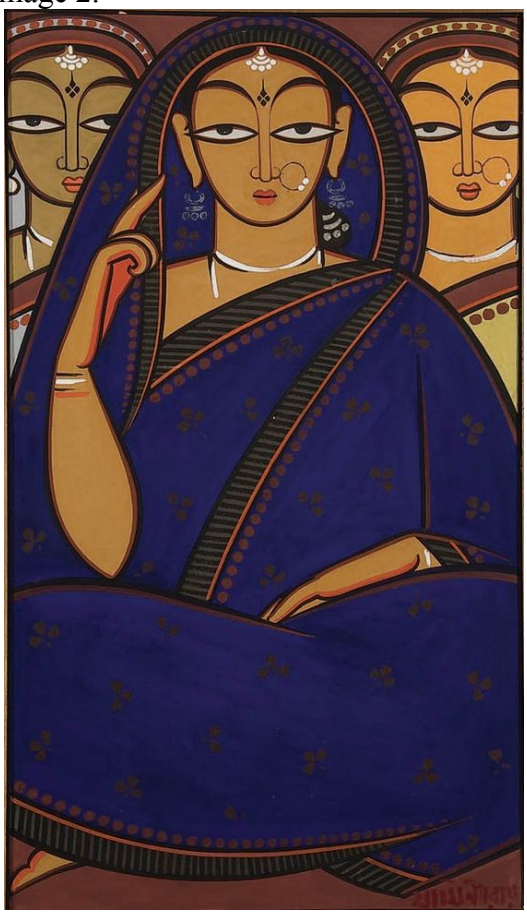
Daughter, Wife, Mother, is a personal reflection of my life, woven together with that of my mother and my grandmother. It is a representation of the performed generational roles of women as they take place the domestic realm. I do not accredit a false sense of power to these characters, nor a false condition of subservience to the patriarchy. I have delved into history in order to present my family as we were, in order to piece together our experiences as multinational and multicultural women of Punjabi, Sikh heritage. *Daughter, Wife, Mother* is an act of my understanding and allowing the viewer to understand how Indian women have consistently remained emblems of cultural survival despite their movement in time and location. Perhaps in my creation of this work I am ironically fulfilling my designated role of sustaining my culture through my passion for pressing paint to canvas. However, I myself have assigned this role to my identity, and it is a role that only I can occupy.

Appendix

Image 1.

Abanindranath Tagore, *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), 1905. Watercolor

Image 2.



Jamini Roy, *Bride and two Companions*, 1952. Tempera.

Image 3.

B. Prabha, *Untitled,* 1933. Oil

Image 4.

B. Prabha, *Untitled (Fisher Women)*. Oil

Image 5.

Amrita Sher-Gil

Image 6.

Amrita Sher-Gil, *Bride's Toilet*, 1937. Oil

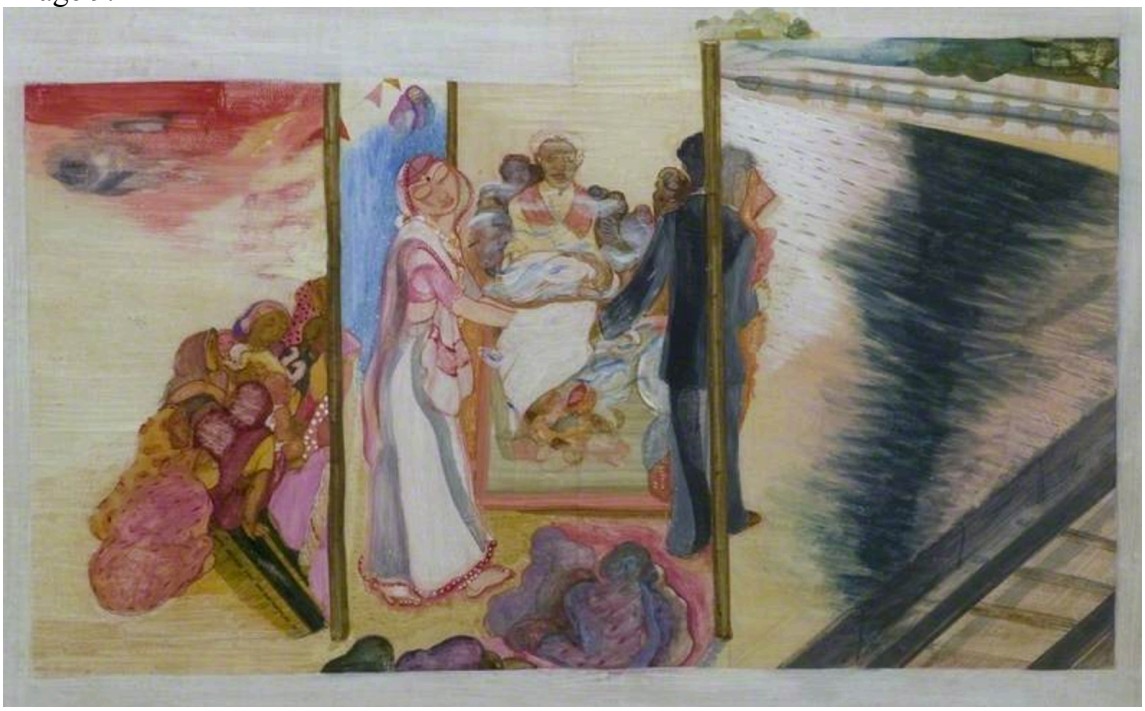
Image 7.

Amrita Sher-Gil, *Three Women*, 1935. Oil

Image 8.

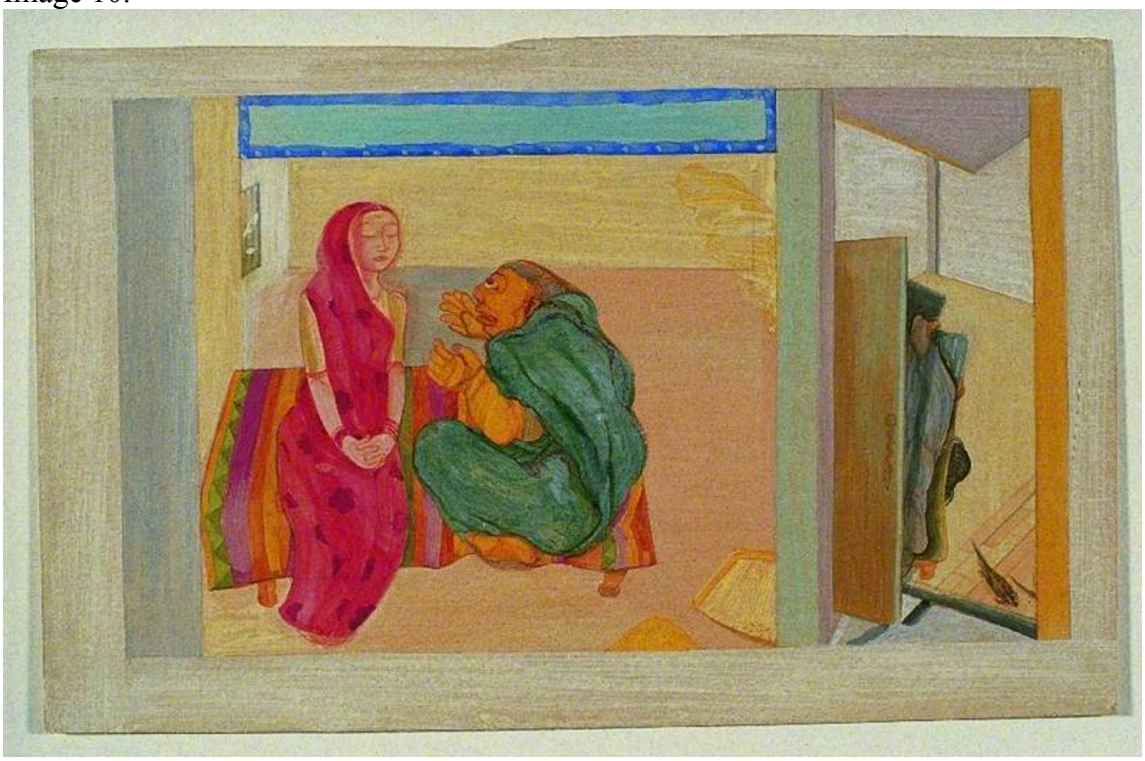
Nilima Sheikh, *Champa, Before her Marriage, and with Her Mother*, 1984. Tempera

Image 9.



Nilima Sheikh, *Marriage and Departure to the In-Laws' Village*, 1984. Tempera.

Image 10.



Nilima Sheikh, *Conflict between the Daughter-in-Law and Mother-in-Law, while the Husband Enjoys a Rest*, 1984. Oil.

Image 11.

John Singer Sargent. *Lady Agnew of Lochnaw*, 1892. Oil

Image 12.

John Singer Sargent, *Nonchaloir (Repose),* 1911. Oil

Image 13.

John Singer Sargent, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit (Portraits d'enfants),* 1882. Oil

Image 14.

Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. Oil

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